

D E P A R T M E N T     O F     T H E     A I R     F O R C E

P R E S E N T A T I O N   T O   T H E   S U B C O M M I T T E E   O N   C I V I L   S E R V I C E

SUBJECT:   Senior Executive Service

STATEMENT OF:   MR. JOSEPH P. POPPLE  
                  Deputy Comptroller of the Air Force

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# Biography

## United States Air Force

Secretary of the Air Force, Office of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C. 20330

JOSEPH P. POPPLE

Mr. Joseph P. Popple is deputy comptroller of the U.S. Air Force, Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C.

Mr. Popple was born Jan 18, 1935, in West Pittston, Pa., and graduated from West Pittston High School in 1952. He received a bachelor of science degree in accounting from Wilkes College, Wilkes-Barre, Pa., in 1956; and a master of public administration degree from The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., in 1965. He graduated from the U.S. Navy Supply Corps School at Athens, Ga., in 1957; the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Washington, D.C., in 1972; and the Harvard University Program for Senior Managers in Government in 1977.



From 1956 to 1959, Mr. Popple served on active duty in the U.S. Navy as disbursing officer for the USS Tanner and supply officer for the USS Brownson. During 1959 and 1960, he was a cost estimator with Montgomery Ward at its Eastern Regional offices in New York City. He entered civil service in 1960 as a GS-9 through the one-year Civil Service Commission Management Intern Training Program. Upon completion of the intern program, he served as a program analyst with the Department of the Army, Ordnance Corps.

In 1962 Mr. Popple joined the Defense Communications Agency in Washington, D.C., as a budget analyst. In 1964 he became the agency's assistant for command, control, and communications program review, and in 1965 was named special assistant to the agency's comptroller. He was promoted to supergrade status as chief, Management Systems Division, Defense Communications Agency in 1970. In 1975 he transferred to Headquarters U.S. Air Force, where he held the dual-hatted position of chief, Budget Management Division, and assistant director, budget, in the Directorate of Budget. He was promoted to his present position in January 1981.

During his career Mr. Popple has received the Air Force Exceptional Civilian Service Award, Air Force Meritorious Civilian Service Award, Defense Communications Agency Exceptional Civilian Service Award and a number of Outstanding Performance Awards. In 1980 the President of the United States conferred on Mr. Popple the rank of Meritorious Executive in the Senior Executive Service. In 1983 he received the Presidential Rank Award of Distinguished Executive.

Mr. Popple resides in Oakton, Va. He is married to the former Judy Gommer, and they have two daughters: Holly and Kimberly.

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(Current as of February 1984)

Dear Madam Chairwoman:

I very much appreciate the opportunity to appear before the subcommittee to present my views on the SES. It is noteworthy that you are soliciting the views of long-term civil servants, since this group is by far the predominant population impacted by the SES legislation. I am a bit concerned, however, that given the relative success of the witnesses here today, you may be getting a somewhat biased view of the service. Accordingly, suggest that you may want to think about randomly selecting a number of other SESers in order to hear the views of a representative cross section of the SES. In a limited way, I have tried to do this by soliciting comments from fellow Air Force SES members. Thus, while I am stating my own views here today, I do find a great deal of consistency between my thinking and this feedback that I have received.

In your invitation, you requested that our testimony address any aspect of the Senior Executive Service which were found to be particularly good or bad. You also stated your objective of trying to answer the question as to what has the SES done to improve or reduce the productivity of the Federal Government. Responding to your first request of commenting on both the good and bad of the SES is quite easy and I will do so later. However, answering the question of productivity is, a task which is impossible to achieve on any objectively measured basis and

therefore, we are left with subjective judgments. These judgments can only be made after a thorough assessment such as that your committee is making. Nonetheless, without having any objective measures at hand and not having gone through a long investigation, let me state my bottomline conclusion on the SES contribution to productivity of the Federal Government.

In my opinion, the SES contribution to productivity is no more nor no less than the contributions of members who labored under the supergrade system. I state this confidently because for over 25 years I have worked for, with, and as a supervisor of senior people in government. What I have seen is overwhelmingly dedicated people who work far beyond reasonable expectations in attempting to do their very best to assure good government, and effective management of governmental programs and institutions. The energy and output of these people was at a high level before the SES and continues under the SES. The real issue on productivity is whether the SES arrangement and the incentives for a career in government will be sufficient in the future to continue to attract the caliber of dedicated people that we need. The next few years should provide that indication, for we have lost a large number of senior people over the last several years, and the question as to whether those following will have the same high competency and dedication has yet to be answered.

The productivity issue is firmly linked to the issue of continued competency of the SES and all civil servants. Therefore, the committee needs to examine on a continuing basis the equitable treatment of the SES and, in fact, all government

employees. A group I might add that has been made a scapegoat almost nonstop for the last 15 years. I think the larger issue of stability and fairness in the Civil Service is really fundamental to a successful SES system. Unfortunately, this stability will not come in the near term, since these hearings are ongoing, issues raised by the GAO and Grace Commission must be dealt with, and the overall campaign for Civil Service reforms continues unabated. These hearings will induce extensive concern.

Beyond urging you to work towards stability I would like to present some other thoughts to you.

-- SES pay is an issue that has been with us for years. You should have no doubt that paycap has cost the government dearly in lost talent and lost productivity. Therefore, despite some relief in the last year or so; the issues of pay comparability and compression head the list of the bad aspects of the SES.

-- Comparability because you cannot forever hold talented people on board nor induce infusion of talented people into SES responsibilities without paying adequate salaries. Any success we may have had in holding people to date is due to the fact that many SESers are already committed to government careers and have too many years invested to start over. I do not believe that the younger people moving into the SES ranks will be as ready to complete a government career, especially with the retirement changes, the other substantial Civil Service changes being

suggested, and the attractiveness of higher compensations levels in the private sector.

-- As damaging as comparability is the pay compression. What is needed here is a scale that provides a significant spread between the GS and SES pay scale and between the pay at the six SES levels. I do not believe this can be accomplished without completely severing the linkage of SES and the Executive Schedule pay scales. One other aspect of compression is that as frustrating as the paycaps are to people at the top, they are even more frustrating to the people coming up through the system who see definite limits on the future and who have to ask themselves, "Why should I take on more risk and responsibility for a little more in pay?"

-- No discussion on the pay issue can be complete without addressing bonuses. If any one subject has caused morale problems within the ranks of SES, I believe it to be this issue. The reasons are quite evident. The first is the fact that most SESers are extremely talented people and even under the most generous and equitable system of bonus distribution allowed under law, you would have half of the people in the SES extremely upset over the fact that they were in the lower half of the class. Second, whereas the law allows up to 50% of SES members to receive bonuses, the Congress and OPM immediately constrained this number to 20%. It would be hard to find an SESer that wasn't incensed by this breach of faith. Raising the ceiling to 35% this past year helped but it still leaves the feeling among SESers that the Congress and Administration have reneged on this major aspect of

the SES legislation. Third, due to the paycap, the stipends and bonuses paid are not always as advertised and we continue the farce of advertising pay rate and bonus schedules which are not real. This tends to put a damper on what should be a very gratifying occasion.

On the positive side, one of the best features of the SES system is the ability to accumulate annual leave on an unlimited basis. Given the demands on individuals in the service, taking advantage of leave earned is an impossible task. The unlimited accrual is a most satisfactory way of accommodating to this situation. In fact, it is the most tangible benefit of the SES system in that every SES benefits from it. It would be a serious disincentive to the SES if this entitlement was to be changed. The discussion of the possibility of doing so has led to an extensive outcry among my associates.

An area of continuing concern to your committee is that of assignment and reassignment of SES members and especially the political vs career aspects of the issue. I'm certain that there is a varying degree of sensitivity here dependent upon the particular governmental department involved and the credibility of the Executive Resources Board in these departments. To the extent that I have observed these actions in the Department of Defense, I have no overwhelming concern. They do bear continuing close scrutiny by Executive Resources Boards, not so much for the political aspects, but from the standpoint of the tendency for senior officials to develop decisions on assignments and

reassignments of SES members without sufficient consultation and without due consideration of both employee and management interests. At the same time I believe that career mobility and the political/career mix is part of the SES contract and we signed up for it when we volunteered to be SES members. What we need to improve in this area is, as mentioned before, a significant difference in pay scales to incentivize moves to more responsible jobs; the assurance of fair reimbursements for the cost of geographical relocations; and strong involvement in SES career management by the department ERBs.

The issues that I have just addressed tend to relate to morale and a sense of well being of the individual members of the SES. Let me at least try to address two issues, performance plans and SES structure, that may impact on the productivity judgments that you are trying to make. Ideally, performance planning and measurement should provide a means for senior leadership of a department to direct the executive towards departmental or agency goals and at the same time incentivize the SES member. It really doesn't work. In reality we find that no one at the SES level, or for that matter, only a few presidential appointees, has the discretionary authority to really do much more than move things in the general direction desired by the Congress and the Administration. Given the extensive micro management starting with the Congress and running through OMB and departmental levels,



I think that you would find the individual SES is very much bound in his ability to substantially control the outcome of government programs. This is not to say that the SES does not play a key role in the success of programs, but to emphasize that performance plans, as a means to definitize and quantify achievement of desired goals and to measure progress, are extremely questionable devices. Having said this I think that as SES members and their supervisors continue to work at performance planning and evaluation, there will be improvement even if we never do perfect the system. In any event there must be a performance planning and assessment system and I have nothing better to recommend. Here again I would place the responsibility squarely with the Resources Boards to assure the effectiveness of agency systems.

The other issue of SES structure relates to the concept of the SES. The SES is envisioned as a management corps, yet a substantial number of the SES members are not managers but technical experts. I have to wonder whether we can lump engineers and scientific experts who are working in technical rather than managerial roles into the mold of general managers. Can we really measure performance and achieve productivity by applying managerial values and judgments to job arenas that involve scientific or other technical expertise? I do not particularly see the incentive systems of the SES appropriately benefiting those experts working in organizationally removed

laboratories. These people contribute successfully but their achievements are not always visible through the performance and oversight systems of the various departments. The committee needs to examine ways to recognize and reward such members in a manner that also incentivizes productivity and technical progress. Most of these people I have talked to feel that the former system of scientific/technical positions should never have been merged into the SES.

There are many other aspects of the SES that are worthy of review by the committee and I'm sure you will get to them. In summary, I believe the SES to be a marked improvement over what we had prior to its inception. Our task should be to continue to refine it and improve it, but in so doing I think we can never lose sight of the fact that the SES is merely one part of a comprehensive system of government employment and you cannot fix just one part of that system.